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ABSTRACT

Given recent funding cutbacks and lagging opportunities for minority groups in higher education, predominantly white colleges and universities must make a concerted effort to retain minority students and to increase their chances of success. Racism is systemic in institutions of higher education and is reinforced by low faculty expectations for academic success among blacks and other minorities. In order to counteract the effects of institutional racism, first, those in leadership positions must recognize that they have a responsibility to address both the financial and social needs of minority students. College presidents and program developers should encourage an institutional environment that reflects and supports ethnic diversity, and they should actively examine existing practices and policies that might have a discriminatory effect. In addition to strong leadership, successful efforts regarding minority student opportunity and retention require the commitment and participation of the entire college or university staff. The third element necessary for improving institutional responsiveness to and retention of minority students is the ongoing evaluation of any programs that are implemented. Effective formative evaluation can serve as an indicator of progress and a guide for future endeavors toward equal educational opportunities. (Author/GC)

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HIGHER EDUCATION'S RESPONSE TO THE NEEDS OF MINORITY STUDENTS: LEADERSHIP AND INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

With a prescriptive frame of reference this article decribes some essential elements affecting higher education's response to the needs of minority students. Retention problems are examined as a source for institutional development: (a) the leadership necessary to facilitate process, (b) the issue of cooperative problem-solving, (c) the necessity for institutional commitment, and (d) the process of program evaluation. The problems of access and retention should be given a top priority status. To resolve many of the problems requires fundamental changes in policy and institutional practices.

HIGHER EDUCATION'S RESPONSE TO THE NEEDS OF
MINORITY STUDENTS: LEADERSHIP AND INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

This paper describes some of the essential elements important in institutional problem-solving regarding the retention of minority students and the effectiveness of opportunity programs. More specifically, this paper 1) examines the role and responsibilities college and university officials can carry out in order to increase the success chances of minority students, and 2) suggests recommendations that may prove relevant to the development and implementation of improved programming.

This paper will focus on minority student retention at predominently white institutions. The use of the descriptor "minority student" refers to those students historically denied equal access and opportunities in higher education. The description of the conditions of Black students is not intended to minimize the conditions of those similarly situated.

The period of the late sixties to the early seventies seems to represent a pivotal point in the pattern of minority admissions to higher education institutions. During the 1960's and up to the mid 1970's many American colleges and universities were the sites of protests by students and others "turned off" by the policies of political leaders in Washington and the widespread concern with American involvement in Vietnam. Minority students, particularly the black students generally concentrated on:

1) the admission of more black students,
2) increased financial support,
3) more black faculty,
4) more aggressive involvement by the university in righting the social wrongs that disadvantaged minorities,
5) the incorporation of black or ethnic studies in the curricula.

The institutions, they felt, should lead the effort to establish a more equitable society.[1]

Minority-oriented programs and other efforts to reduce or eradicate the effects of institutional racism in higher education are currently experiencing a growing resistance to these efforts in the form of federal budget cuts and retrenchment effects. During the Reagan administration's first year in office the Congress approved major cuts in the federal budget that will sharply affect education and minority-oriented programs. A number of studies have documented an apparent shift in support for these programs.[2]

On the other hand, the last two decades have witnessed dramatic increases in minority representation at all levels of the educational pipeline and in virtually all fields. Unfortunately, the rate of progress has dimished almost to a trickle. Currently, minority under-representation increases at each higher level of the educational pipeline and is especially severe in the sciences and engineering.[3]

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[1]James W. Turner, for example wrote: "Presently, black students are trained to live and work in a white middle-class environment. They are compelled to study and learn about the politics, art, economics and culture of white people as if black people, their community, and their problems did not exist." "Black Studies: Challenges to Higher Education." in G. Kerry Smith, ed., The Troubled Campus (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., Publishers, 1970), for the American Association of Higher Education, p. 203.

2 Gerald R. Gill, Meanness Mania (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1980); Faustine Jones, The Changing Mood in America (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1977); J.D. Lehner Jr., A Losing Battle: The Decline of Black Participation in Graduation and Professional Education. A report prepared for the National Advisory Committee on Black Higher Education and Black Colleges and Universities (Washington, D.C.: Department of Education, 1980); National Advisory Committee on Black Higher Education and Black Colleges and Universities, Access of Black Americans to Higher Education: How Open Is the Door? (Washington, D.C.: Department of Education, 1979).

[3]Alexander Astin. Minorities in American Higher Education (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1982), p. 177.

The pursuit of equal educational opportunity in higher education is obviously an important goal, it is important however that the concept of equal educational opportunity be expanded beyond the issue of access. In an effort to give precision to the definition of educational opportunity, Elizabeth Abramovitz subdivides the problem of educational opportunity into the concepts of "access", "distribution", and "persistence". In her report to the Institute for the Study of Educational Policy she explains:

> "Access means that black students have the opportunity to enroll in undergraduate, graduate, or professional schools. Distribution refers to choice, the opportunity for black students to enter different types of institutions and fields of study. And persistence refers to the opportunity to remain in college and complete their training in a timely fashion. In order to have equal educational opportunity, a black student must not just have the opportunity to enroll in college, but a choice of institution and programs, and a chance to complete the training once begun."[4]

INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT REGARDING OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS AND MINORITY STUDENT RETENTION

Only recently have higher education institutions been studied as formal organizations capable of synergistic operation. Models that examine student academic development, faculty productivity, leadership, goal orientations, and the ability to acquire necessary resources stand out as significant contributions.[5] If we view colleges and universities as formal organizations we can also recognize the problems of minority student attrition as systemic, that is affecting the institution generally.

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[4]Elizabeth Abramovitz, Equal Educational Opportunity for Blacks in U.S. Higher Education: An Assessment (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1976) p. 19.

[5]Edward Gross, "Universities as Organizations: A Research Approach," American Sociological Review 33 (August 1968): 518-544; Kim Cameron, "Measuring Organizational Effectiveness in Institutions of Higher Education", Administrative Science Quarterly 23 (December 1978): 604-634.

An important problem systemic to American Higher Education is the continued presence of institutional racism, reinforced by low expectations for the academic success of black and other minority students. The research is extensive on teacher expectations and teacher behaviors. This problem exists at all levels of education. The research clearly reveals that:

1) teachers do form different expectations for different students,

2) the expectations influence the instructional interactions between students and teachers, and

3) student achievement gains are correlated with the teacher's expectations.[6]

In a recent study the National Advisory Committee on Black Higher Education and Black Colleges and Universities observed the following conditions:

> "Black students who receive special financial aid or academic assistance get the message that "special" is inferior-- that they do not deserve to be at the predominantly white university. The badge of inferiority is then pinned on all Black students, including those of the highest academic ability and those with no financial need."[7]

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[6]Kathleen C. Christensen and William E. Sedlacek, "Differential Faculty Attitudes Towards Blacks, Females and Students in General," Journal of the National Association of Women Deans, Administrators and Counselors 37 (Winter 1974): 78-84; Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, "Self-Fulfilling Prophecies in the Classroom: Teachers Expectations as Unintended Determinants of Pupils Intellectual Competence." Dr. Martin Deutsh, et al (eds), Social Class, Race, and Psychological Development (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968); Jere E. Brophy and Thomas L. Good, "Teacher's Communication of Differential Expectations for Children's Classroom Performance," Journal of Educational Psychology 61 (October 1970): 365-374.

[7]National Advisory Committee on Black Higher Education and Black Colleges and Universities. Admission and Retention Problems of Black Students at Seven Predominantly White Universities. (Washington, D.C.: Department of Education, 1980) p.19.

Institutional change is never easy. It is especially difficult when the issues are as thorny and emotional as racism and sexism. Robert Terry makes the following observation regarding institutional change:

> "Organizations offer substantial rewards for people to conform to organizational goals, so it is no wonder that there is general passivity toward changing the fundamental nature of most large organizations. The risk is often too great for the rewards one gets." 8

Regarding opportunity programs for the disadvantaged Fred E. Crossland cites the following:

> "No essential change in the overall college curriculum has occurred as a result of the addition of programs for the disadvantaged, although responsive practices have been introduced."[9]

There are certain essential elements that describe successful programs for retaining and graduating minority students. Leadership, systematic problem-solving, commitment, and program evaluation are critical variables for mainstreaming black and other minority students.

Essentials of Leadership

Those in leadership positions must first of all recognize and feel that they have a problem to solve or a responsibility to address the retention and needs of minority students. Opportunity program professionals, counselors, faculty, and external consultants may collect sufficient data to demonstrate a problem, but the institution's leadership must recognize that the problem belongs to them. Those in leadership positions who

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[8]Robert Terry, "The White Male Club: Biology and Power", Civil Rights Digest 10 (Spring 1974) p.3.

[9]Fred E. Crossland, Minority Access to College (New York: Schocken Books, 1971) p. 103.

consider the needs of minority students should not play games with the allocation of resources for such programs.

Black students need greater financial assistance. It is the responsibility of the university to carefully devise a plan for the black student to meet his or her economic needs. This does not mean black students should be given or are looking for a "hand-out". The institution can however provide the student with job skills through student employment programs, thus making him or her employable during summer months and possibly while attending the last two years of college work for the bachelor's degree.

In short, these responsibilities of leadership are handled like any other responsibility necessary for the vitality of the institution. The role of the president, his or her staff, and minority-oriented program professionals is to increase an understanding of the problem, generate and focus the energies of all groups towards its solution, and facilitate the development of skills and programs to solve. it.

Finally, the tendency to "blame the victim" should be avoided through focusing on the institution -- its culture, policies, practices, power and resource distribution -- rather than exclusively on the life of minorities. Such a focus might include the following:

1) <u>The need to develop an institutional culture that is supportive and reflects the diversity found at the institution</u>. Does the institution's environment support and nurture the development of healthy attitudes towards themselves and other Black people? Are the academic and personal development experiences offered relevant to minority students? or do they reflect the values and norms of white and middle-class students?

2) Designing policies that are more flexible and responsive to the needs of all students. Is the institution's admissions policy designed to consider the possibility that non-traditional criteria for admissions may better predict the success of minority students? Does the institution's policy regarding non-discrimination result in the hiring and retention of minority faculty and professional staff, many of whom serve as valuable role models for minority students?

3) Examining institutional practices and procedures that potentially have a discriminatory effect. Since many of the practices and procedures in the institution originate during committee deliberations, do the various standing and ad hoc committees of the institution include those who understand and represent the needs of minority students? Are the practices and procedures implemented congruent with the institutions affirmative action programs?

4) The need to make the most of scarce resources without penalizing minority student programs. Assuming equality of opportunity is fundamental to the mission of the institution, do retention programs receive an equitable share of the human and material resources available? Are budgetary decisions reached after appropriate evaluation and consultation with those responsible for the program's implementation?

Systematic Problem-Solving

Successful efforts in institutional development regarding opportunity programs and minority student retention should include the entire staff. Faculty, administrators, counselors and others must accept their share of the overall responsibility toward solving the problems and recognize the interlocking links required to facilitate the process. Too often

people take the attitude, "If only the administration would," or "If only my staff would do this," the problem would be solved. They have to say, "We have an over-all problem at this institution, but this particular part of it belongs to me and I must do my share in solving it."

Systematic problem-solving and other principles of organizational development serve to improve the conditions of institutional life for all involved. Institutional nonresponsiveness to change not only affects the minority student but all other students as well. Institutional development regarding minority student retention efforts are more likely to succeed when the efforts are (a) planned and supported from the top, (b) goal-focused and (c) promote the self-interests of all groups found at the institution.

These efforts must also focus in part on the "climate" of the institution. Negative stereotypes, bigoted attitudes and biased behavior influences interpersonal relationships, institutional structure, and increases the possibilities for self-imposed alienation on the part of minority students.

Institutional Commitment

The institution's leadership, faculty, and staff must want to solve the problems adversely affecting minority students. Knowing that you have a problem is one thing, but saying, "Yes, I want to work to help solve it" is another. Minority student attrition, insufficient financial aid, a lack of culturally relevant programs, and feelings of racial hostility are issues that must be addressed.

Institutions, as they increasingly commit themselves to providing equal educational opportunities, should:

- Have a carefully developed action plan that will address problems of minority student attrition and make it a working document.

- Make periodic reports to the university community on status and progress in relation to the plan.

- Actively recruit and provide access in addition to student services needed.

- Refrain from policies that are formulated to admit only high achieving students who have been socialized to fit the university's image of scholarship, cultural and social development.

- Recruit and hire more minority faculty, administrators, and staff to serve as models of achievement, and to be resources to assist students with their problems.

- Provide sufficient financial aid to minority students. Understandably, most fianancial aid packages are based on need; however, book loans, part-time employment and contingency funds for financial emergencies can be made available.

- Plan and implement faculty development experiences such as workshops and seminars, in order to create faculty awareness and commitment to a successful retention program.

Program Evaluation

It is also essential that the university's leadership "own the process" during any intervention designed to improve the effectiveness of minority-oriented programs. Planning, implementing and evaluating the process must be carried out in cooperation with those in power and decision-making positions. Any data collection should be presented in simple and understandable formats to decision-makers. As they work with the data they can then expand and study it. It thus becomes theirs. On too many occasions those who collect the data and own it are ignored when the data is presented to decision-makers. They (decision-makers) sometimes opt to walk away from it.[10]

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[10]George A. Hunt, "Team Building: Some Key Issues", Cooperative Educational Services, Department of Research and Evaluation, Norwalk, Connecticut, 1980.

In principle, the matter of program evaluation should be an evolving one. Evaluation that focuses on outcomes can and should be used formatively. When a trial or intervention fails to be sufficient, regarding increasing student retention for example, those involved want to know why it failed and how to assure its success the next time.

Formative evaluation provides assessments during the efforts to improve minority student retention. This type of evaluation provides a useful means for reviewing effectiveness of procedures or activities. Such an evaluation points out areas of strengths and weakness within the ongoing program so that they can be corrected. In effect, this means of evaluation provides diagnosis for needs that emerge during the interventions. Feedback from minority students can be useful and provides additional data for this evaluation. This feedback is important in making corrections during the effort or in reinforcing the correctness of the activities. Personnel need to know how successful the program is while it is taking place.

Effective evaluation will be linked to the identified needs of minority students and ideally serve as a map or progress report that serves to guide the efforts of the institution toward the realization of equal educational opportunities.

SUMMARY

With regard to minority students, the problems of access and retention in higher education should be given a top priority status. All minority groups are increasingly underrepresented at each higher transition point in the higher educational system. Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and Native Americans suffer disproportionately high losses at all transition points in higher education.

Fundamental changes in many of the policies and practices of American higher education are needed to address the concerns described in this paper. Implicit throughout the elements described are recommendations that will hopefully provide additional perspectives regarding the resolution of important problems.

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